

Study: University rankings influence number and competitiveness of applicants

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How universities fare on reputational quality-of-life and academic rankings – such as those published by the Princeton Review or U.S. News & World Report – can have a measurable effect on the number of applications they – and their competitors – receive and on the academic competitiveness of the resulting freshman class, according to a new study.

The study, "True for Your School? How Changing Reputations Alter Demand for Selective U.S. Colleges," by Randall Reback, associate professor at Barnard College of Columbia University, and Molly Alter, a research analyst for the Research Alliance for New York City Schools at New York University, will be published online this month in Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis (EEPA), a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association.

Reback and Alter studied the importance of quality of life and academic reputations by examining the often-criticized college rankings in the Princeton Review's Best Colleges guidebooks and in U.S. News & World Report's America's Best Colleges series, along with comprehensive college-level data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

"There is strong evidence that changes in [colleges'](#) quality-of-life and academic reputations affect both the number of applications that colleges receive and the characteristics of their next incoming classes of students," said Reback. "It raises important questions about the large role

these arbitrary rankings can play in the college selection process."

Impact of Quality-of-Life Rankings

The study considered eight "Top 20" lists from the Princeton Review's books. In addition to Best Overall Academic Experience for Undergraduates, they included Happy Students; Least Happy Students; Most Beautiful Campus; Unsightly, Tiny Campus; Party Schools; Stone-Cold Sober Schools; and Jock Schools.

Among the findings:

- The number of applications and the academic competitiveness of a school's incoming class were increased by making the lists for Happy Students (2.9 percent increase) or Most Beautiful Campus (2.3 percent increase), whereas applications and competitiveness were negatively affected by being on the Least Happy Students (about a 5 percent decrease) or Unsightly, Tiny Campus lists (5.2 percent decrease).
- Reputational changes for close competitors can either enhance or weaken a college's own ability to recruit students. Unfavorable quality-of-life ratings for peer colleges are followed by decreases in a college's own application pool and the academic competitiveness of its incoming class.
- Geographic diversity is affected by quality-of-life ratings, with increases in the percentage of first-year students from out of state for schools on the Happy Students (about 3.7 percent) and Most Beautiful Campus (about 2 percent) lists.
- Inclusion on the Party Schools, Stone-Cold Sober Schools, or Jock Schools list does not have a statistically significant effect on the overall number of applicants; however, inclusion on the Top 20 list for Party Schools predicts an 8 to 9 percent decline in the percentage of first-year students from out of state.

Impact of Academic Rankings

Reback and Alter also examined the impact of academic rankings – such as those published by Princeton Review and U.S. News & World Report – on the number and competitiveness of applicants received by universities and by their competitors.

Among the findings:

- Being one of the top 25 schools ranked by U.S. News is associated with an increase in applications between 6 and 10 percent. A school's specific numerical ranking does not predict the volume of applications; simply making the list is what causes an increase. Colleges see a 2.3 percent increase in applicants when they make Princeton Review's Top 20 list for academics.
- While peer colleges' quality-of-life reputations have a complementary effect on a college's own recruitment efforts, this is not the case for an increase in peers' academic reputations: peer colleges' favorable academic ratings decrease the demand for a particular college. Applications decrease by 2.9 percent after a peer institution makes the Princeton Review's Top 20 list for academics.
- Applications decrease by 6.3 percent after a peer institution's ranking rises to the top 11 to 25 in U.S. News & World Report. A peer [school](#)'s ranking of 11 to 25 also causes the academic competitiveness of the freshman class to decline.
- Being ranked by U.S. News & World Report's list is associated with about a 10-point increase in fraction of out-of-state applicants, with higher rankings bringing greater geographic diversity.

Caveats for Consumers

Given the wide availability and influence of the rankings, Reback and Alter note that a review of college guidebook and website practices by an independent organization, in order to assess the objectivity of the content, may be in the public interest.

The Princeton Review bases its guidebooks on unscientific administrative survey data obtained from colleges as well as surveys of current students which, Reback and Alter say, are notorious among college administrators for selection bias. The Princeton Review does not publicly disclose its method of aggregating survey results, and its formal ratings, Reback and Alter find, are determined in a haphazard fashion. Reback and Alter also note that many college administrators and other critics have decried the arbitrary nature of the U.S. News rankings.

Provided by American Educational Research Association

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